

# Food, bodies, and the “stuff” of (not) eating in anorexia

Lavis, Anna

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**Anna Lavis, University of Birmingham**

## **Food, Bodies, and the “Stuff” of (Not) Eating in Anorexia**

**Abstract:** The diverse materialities that form part of lived experiences of mental ill-health and its treatment have been largely overlooked in research. Arguing that such a focus is key to enhancing understandings of eating disorders, this paper engages with food-centered practices in anorexia nervosa. Against the background of work that has recognized the desire to maintain their illness among some individuals, the paper suggests that holding onto anorexia is a dynamic process enacted through eating as well as by avoiding food. Individuals’ negotiations of ingesting and digesting elucidate the blurred intersections between eating and not eating, edible and inedible. They reveal that what is experienced as eating may not *look* like eating and vice versa. As contingent forms of eating thereby emerge and dissolve through anorexia-focused practices, vectors of ingestion and assimilation come to be remapped and eating delineated as an act that may take place across corporeal surfaces and among multiple bodies. While such an engagement with materialities offers key insights into anorexia, it also contributes to a wider theorizing of the act of eating within food studies literature; the paper asks what eating is, as well as what forms it takes. This problematizes taken-for-granted relationships among eating, bodies, and food. Their dislocations demonstrate eating to produce and reconfigure, as well as displace or break down, materialities.

**Keywords:** anorexia nervosa, corporeality, desire, eating, (im)materiality, self-starvation

## Introduction

With a focus on the materialities and immaterialities of bodies and foods, this paper explores (not) eating practices among individuals with anorexia. Through these it asks two key questions: How might an attention to material encounters between bodies and food offer insights into key aspects of the experience of anorexia? And, in turn, how does tracing these encounters within the specific context of anorexia enhance critical understandings of eating? The former, then, calls for an attention to the often-overlooked role of materialities in lived experiences of mental ill-health, while the latter seeks to contribute to food studies literature by interrogating the act of eating and theorizing its myriad forms.

To explore these questions, the discussion draws on data from two qualitative studies within large National Health Service (NHS) inner-city mental health trusts in England: The first involved participant observation and interviews with individuals being treated in an eating disorders inpatient unit (EDU) (2007–8) and the second comprised interviews with users of eating disorders outpatient, daypatient, and inpatient services (2013–15). Alongside these, the paper draws on anthropological participant observation and interviews conducted on pro-anorexia websites (2005–13) as well as on academic and media discussions of eating disorders.

The aim of this analysis is not to unearth the causes of eating disorders. Rather, acknowledging anorexia to be profoundly dangerous and distressing, this paper extends a recent recognition of the “desire” (Lavis 2011, 2016) to hold onto their existing anorexia among some individuals. This has illustrated that not eating maintains an illness that is profoundly dangerous and distressing and yet that may offer a painful and precarious way of coping with day-to-day life and distress.

Such desire gives rise to a very felt and lived paradox, which underpins the following discussion: to be anorexic one must eat as little as possible and yet to hold onto anorexia (if that is desired) one must also eat enough to stay alive. Situating our analysis within this moment of contradiction elucidates that holding onto the illness is a dynamic process enacted through practices which draw into encounter the messy and malleable materialities of food and anorexia. Through these, eating is constantly reconfigured so that it may feel as unlike eating as possible. These affective navigations of food give rise to fractures and multiplicities of eating; it is disassembled and reassembled, and takes multiple forms.

Thus, having begun by asking what anorexia is, the paper unfolds by reflecting on what eating is. It does this by engaging with the three forms that most frequently emerge from participants' narratives: bodily incorporation; eating through the skin; and shared eating. These are presented in a narrative sequence that increasingly problematizes what eating is and does, as well as its relationship to food and bodies. Beginning with a normative imagining of eating as the individual taking of food into the body, it is first spatially repositioned to take place across bodily surfaces before becoming an act that can be shared among bodies. These permutations illustrate that eating may be agential or fearfully accidental, and they demonstrate individuals' struggles with *both* food *and* anorexia, as each is extremely distressing.

Paying attention to food in relation to an illness more habitually framed in terms of its absence thereby offers a way to trace how body/food encounters are simultaneously positioned outside, and yet central to, anorexia. This has significant implications for understandings of the complexities of anorexia. Acknowledging these, throughout its analysis, the paper importantly maintains a focus on the realities of living through the illness—the slippages and losses of agency, the fear and suffering. It comprises a recognition of the way in which not eating may not be fully agential, or even desired, and yet it balances

this with an engagement with the voices of individuals themselves. To disallow either to overshadow the other, the paper seesaws between these diverse forms of eating and consists of an exploratory feeling around the edges of eating, food, and bodies, rather than an analytical fixing of their boundaries.

This materially informed analysis thereby also intersects with wider scholarly concerns. As the food-centered practices of anorexic participants problematize any easy assumptions regarding what eating is, this paper seeks to contribute to food studies literature by theorizing the act of eating; it interrogates and challenges eating's relationships with tasting, swallowing, and digesting, and explores the agencies of both eater and eaten.

It has been suggested that to take account of food as a nexus of material, symbolic, and political “stuff,” it is necessary to pay attention to eating bodies (cf. Abbots and Lavis 2013). Engaging with the food-centered practices of individuals with anorexia underscores a similar but further need to focus attention on that eating body—on “what bodies are and do when they eat” (Probyn 2000: 14) and, importantly, *do not* eat.

This elicits interrogation of the role of the eater, and non-eater, in the production of materiality as bodies and foods are made and displaced in relation to one another. Engaging with recent discussions of food's “vibrant materiality” (Bennett 2010) and the ways in which objects become edible (cf. Evans and Miele 2012; Roe 2006), the paper traces the many moments during which food slip-slides into what we might term, for want of a better word, “non-food,” and vice versa, as eatable and edible are drawn into conflict through the (non)eating body.

As such, these explorations of (not) eating elucidate the “liminality” (Turner 1967) of food as participants mobilize it across conceptual and corporeal thresholds by salivating and swallowing, viewing and chewing. This highlights the necessity of taking account of uncertainty and contingency in relationships among eating and bodily materialities, as these

may become dislocated both in the context of anorexia and more widely. Recognizing that eating absents or materializes food, as well as anorexia, demonstrates how the very “stuff” of food and bodies is drawn into question through mundane moments of consumption and starvation.

### **What Is Anorexia? Desire and (Not) Eating**

There is no doubt that anorexia nervosa is a painful, frightening and dangerous illness. Yet, while participants’ narratives are replete with distress and suffering, many also resonate with an ambivalent “desire” (Lavis 2011, 2016) to maintain the illness. Anorexia is often described as a “part of me” and during fieldwork, Eva, who was an inpatient at the time, illustrated this claim: “If a doctor took a scalpel and tried to cut him [anorexia] out, he’d just leave his shoelaces behind anyway.” Participants also frequently refer to the illness as a “friend” (see also Grahame 2009; Serpell et al. 1999), and in her interview Indira said: “I think it becomes a bit of like a friend, like it’s a... It’s almost like it’s a world that you live in, that’s separate from everybody else.” Many reasons have been put forth in interviews for describing anorexia in this way. Friendship is circumscribed with articulations of how it can be “helpful” and “protective,” and may even offer a “safe space” or a “cloud away from everyone else.” Such narratives are often interwoven with descriptions of the illness also as “torturing,” “awful,” and “hell,” with these juxtapositions occurring within the serrated space of the same sentence.

As such, participants’ accounts elucidate how anorexia can become an (extremely painful) way of being for some individuals with the illness. As “living through anorexia” is conceptualized in interviews as a way of “living through” day-to-day life or distress, the illness is described as a coping strategy. Participants can find it extremely painful, know that

it is dangerous, and yet they may also want to hold onto it, at least temporarily. Anorexia can therefore be felt to be both an illness and a modality of caring for oneself (see Lavis 2015a).

Unlike the plethora of popular imaginings of anorexia as a quest for thinness against all odds, many research participants have not expressed a wish to become thin. Rather, the desire articulated by some individuals is, albeit ambivalently, directed at holding onto the illness. Against this background, thinness *becomes* important only as a temporally later way in which to visually check and measure the continuing presence of this “friend” anorexia (see Lavis 2014). Such a looking beyond thinness in analysis is in line with the work of other scholars who have also engaged with the practices, meanings, and subjectivities of individuals with anorexia (cf. Eli 2014; Gooldin 2008; Lester 2014). Reflecting on the desire to maintain anorexia thereby shifts our understanding of the illness. It highlights the necessity of acknowledging the extreme suffering that anorexia causes, while also suggesting that we need to take into account how it comes to be important to some individuals. Underpinned by subjectivities of anorexia’s protective “care,” it is this that sets in motion practices of (not) eating.

In her interview, Miriam said: “If you eat you’ve given in, you’ve stuffed yourself silly and... and that’s not right. You just shouldn’t do that.” She described eating as threatening—both to herself and anorexia. With this sense of threat in mind, it is clear how eating can come to be feared; in her interview, Lydia said:

If I was in a situation where I had to eat something that I was really uncomfortable with, erm...just to sort of, satisfy the people and keep it quiet I suppose, it could, it could play on me to the point of tears where I would get very, very upset and would not be able to sleep that night thinking about what I’d eaten.

This discomfort—even fear—of food also illustrates how not eating may not always be entirely agential; in her interview, Kayley said: “It’s not exactly a choice, kind of. Well, it’s not like you’re just thinking, like, ‘Oh, I won’t eat because...’ It, it’s more, kind of, like, it’s more that you can’t, really.” In spite of this blurring of agency and its loss, it is clear what eating and not eating *do* in (and to) anorexia. But, it is less obvious what eating and not eating *are*, where the boundaries between them lie, and what counts as “food” in this context.

Participants’ narratives thereby illustrate the fundamental and viscerally felt tension of living with anorexia that I set out in the introduction to this paper: to be anorexic you must eat as little as possible, and yet to hold onto anorexia, if that is desired, you must also eat enough to stay alive (see also Lavis 2013). From this, anorexia emerges as maintained not only by *not* eating but also, seemingly paradoxically perhaps, by *eating*. In this paradox lies the key to forging more nuanced understandings of anorexia, as well as of eating itself. It is this simultaneity of needing to eat and yet not eat that sees the act of eating perpetually reshaped and reconfigured because participants’ engagements with food suggest that eating needs to be *made* to be (and perhaps, fundamentally, feel) as *unlike* eating as possible; it needs to be contained and confined, squashed and reshaped. This underscores the practices explored throughout the rest of this paper. Perhaps suggesting that reflecting on eating always necessitates a rather strong stomach, this tracing of eating’s various guises will begin by exploring how eating and bodies are turned inside out through vomiting.

### **Boundaries: Eating as Bodily Incorporation**

During fieldwork in the inpatient eating disorders unit (EDU) I encountered vomit under cushions, in seemingly unopened kitchen supply boxes, behind radiators, in plant pots, and on supposedly clean plates in the dining room cupboards, among other places. And arguments over vomit found in washing machines, showers, and other shared spaces abounded between



inpatients. Nora vomited frequently in many places around the unit as well as in her own clothes and bed. Staff claimed that she had ripped the pocket of her trousers inside so that any food and vomit put in the pocket would fall down her leg where it lay undetected. I once asked Nora why she vomited so frequently, to which she replied, “I just don’t want it [food] inside me.” Nora’s words suggest food to be “matter out of place” (Douglas 2002) as the body is felt to be the “wrong” location for food. They also, moreover, paint a portrait of anorexia itself and food as polarities.

Vomiting was described by many participants as a “cure” for having eaten, especially where that eating is enforced by treatment. In her memoir of anorexia Nikki Grahame (2009: 220) asserts, “I could puke up a 1,000 calorie lunch in less than a minute.” As Grahame implies, particularly in a context of unagential eating, such as in an inpatient unit, vomiting erects or resurrects a conceptual and physical boundary between food and the body. Simply put, it would seem to be the absolute reversal of eating—one that is performed within and through the body (albeit also one that relies on eating—thereby echoing the same paradoxical binary from which this paper unfurls). Vomiting signifies an act of restitution that graphically draws our attention to how, in the context of anorexia (and perhaps more broadly), “eating is always, more or less, a form of pollution” (Giordano 2005: 127) that is “liable to defile” (Kristeva 1982: 75). This sense of eating as an act of “self-interruption” (Berlant 2007: 777) also denotes the semi permeability of an eating body’s boundaries (see Mol 2008).

This offers up a conceptualization of eating bodies as always *potentially* turned inside out not only by vomiting but also by eating; vomit sets in motion a reversal of expected and everyday categories, as well as of foods, perhaps. While evoking, thus, the sense of “liminality” (Turner 1967) that intrinsically imbues a body that eats as well as vomits, this rather unpalatable beginning to the discussion has brought forth a solid, bounded portrait of eating through its reflection in vomiting. Posing eating and vomiting as opposites frames

eating as a linear moment of bodily incorporation; it is, quite simply, the swallowing and digestion of food. This bounded conceptualization of eating as the taking of food into bodily depths gives rise to other embodied mediations of this act.

Participants to the research, as well as on pro-anorexia websites, describe ingesting black coffee to move any food consumed through the digestion system as quickly as possible and also to raise metabolism, thereby burning it off as quickly as possible. Like vomiting, this affords a glimpse at ways in which body/food encounters are negotiated—and indeed, negated—in bodily depths as well as at corporeal edges. Yet, this begins to suggest that eating may perhaps not be as clear-cut an act of ingestion through the mouth as vomiting might have suggested it to be; it can be rejected within and with the body. This sense that ingesting and eating are becoming dislocated from one another will become clearer as the paper unfolds. For now, such embodied negotiations of eating not only position food and bodies as opposites, but also illustrate the role of eating (and not eating) bodies in the production of the very “stuff” of food—and, for want of a better word, non-food. This process becomes further apparent in another practice that maintains the sense of eating-as-incorporation that vomiting sets in motion, but also narrows it down, leaving taste outside.

A practice enacted and described by some participants during fieldwork was “chewing and spitting.” In this, individuals take mouthfuls of food, and chew it—tasting and rolling it around the mouth—before spitting it out. This is suggested to be a common practice among individuals with eating disorders who are inpatients (Guarda et al. 2004) and it is also discussed on pro-anorexia websites. There, chewing and spitting is described as a way of testing one’s ability to self-starve by navigating along the edges of eating and engaging with a pleasurable aspect of it—the taste of food. By refusing food not only in but also *through* the body, chewing and spitting constitutes a way to maintain anorexia by not eating. It borrows vomit’s enactment of eating as swallowing, employing this to conceptually dislocate the

mouth from the esophagus and stomach. At first glance chewing and spitting *looks* like eating and it may even *feel* like eating; we could even think of it as “eating safely,” where that word is delineated along the lines of the logic of anorexia rather than bodily health. But perhaps it is, instead, an emulation of eating. As Sianne Ngai (2001: 194) suggests, emulation “often works to produce the exact opposite of identification: to make manifest an incongruity or disjunction, to forcefully assert one’s difference from that which one emulates.” In chewing and spitting there is simulation (Baudrillard 1983) rather than assimilation. As a boundary is drawn across the throat, eating is interrupted and its boundaries too are redrawn. Now, *only* ingestion and digestion “count” as eating; tasting does not.

In his discussion of affect and food, Ben Highmore (2010: 120) argues that “to concentrate on taste to the exclusion of other senses means to fail to recognize that the experience of eating is also dependent on the haptic sensitivity of tongues and mouths, on our olfactory abilities, and on sight and sound.” His words draw attention to the way in which, in common parlance, taste is often a central concern of celebratory discussions of eating. In contrast to doom-filled prophesies about the so-called epidemic of “globesity” (Delpeuch et al. 2009) and the apparent need to tighten our collective belt, debates over taste abound on social media and in wider popular discourses on food. In his discussion of the senses, Michel Serres (2008: 152) describes the invigorating of tastebuds as “the gaining of a new mouth,” one no longer anaesthetized by speech and language; “the mouth of discourse excludes the mouth of taste.” This suggests that through tasting, bodies are materialized as tongues encounter worlds.

It is this encounter that also renders chewing and spitting such a precarious practice in participants’ narratives. Tasting is fearful because it is pleasurable; it is described as “good” in relation to the wider sense of food as undesired and dangerous, which is often articulated through discussions of feeling “too full,” “sick,” or “stretched” after eating. As such, while

concurring with Geneviève Teil and Antoine Hennion's (2004: 35) suggestion that "taste is an action, not a fact; it is an experience, not an object," here it is also disruptive of experience and objects. Although chewing and spitting facilitates the maintenance of anorexia against the living hungry body, tasting is dangerous because it intervenes in conceptualizations of food as inherently "bad." It thereby threatens that process of maintaining one's "friend," anorexia.

In chewing and spitting, thus, food becomes uncertain and also liminal; while chewing could be said to make, or perhaps remake, food as eatable, spitting shunts this substance across a threshold, altering it into "not eatable" and thus, perhaps, reproducing it as non-food. How food becomes edible or inedible has been explored across diverging contexts in the social sciences, from cultural productions of taste to the material culture of packaging. In her discussion of processes through which "edibility is materially actualised," Emma Roe (2006: 467) has suggested these to be relationally embedded in material environments. Through chewing and spitting, instead, food is imbued with potentiality to become edible or inedible within the moment of a body/food encounter that takes place *inside* the mouth, on the taste buds. As such, although Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (2005: 15) suggested that "taste enables us to distinguish all that has a flavour or that is merely edible," it is taste that acts to take us beyond the binary of edible and inedible here. This engenders an important distinction between becoming edible and "becoming food" (Probyn 2011), as these have arguably often been conflated in food studies discussions. Here, food becomes uneatable, albeit edible, as these categories are fractured and set into collision with one another. As such, (not) eating bodies produce the materiality of food and non-food in ways contingent and even haptic. The imminent and affectively dangerous potential of food to traverse categories of edibility and what we might term in contrast "eatability" is also seen to work in

reverse. As the next section will explore, bodies can be felt to eat in ways that show the consumption of food to take place unagentially across corporeal surfaces.

### **Surfaces: Eating as Body/Food Encounter**

On pro-anorexia websites there are many aphorisms such as this:

Food is mean and sneaky. It tricks you into eating it and it works on you from the inside out, making you fat, bloated, ugly, and unhappy.

In this categorization of food as “sneaky,” there is a sense of food as untrustworthy. This affords a glimpse of eating as potentially an act that is performed by *both* eater and eaten, person and food. The first way in which this emerges from participants’ narratives is through descriptions of eating “accidentally” through the skin.

On the EDU once a week a few patients nearing the end of their admissions prepared meals under supervision. Each would plan, shop for, and cook dinner with the occupational therapist. Then the members of Cooking Group would eat together in a room separate from the dining room. The usual atmosphere of Cooking Group was a mixture of chat, music, and gallows humor. Yet, woven through these was a palpable fear and horror of food and eating that manifested in embodied ways. I began to notice that participants often had difficulty touching food, choosing to wear rubber gloves to handle raw ingredients, for example, or nudging bits of broccoli or cheese around chopping boards with spoons or chopsticks. Some would hold serving utensils by the tip, as far away as possible from the food, and many would jump back hastily if a drop of mashed potato flew off the spoon. Others would wash their hands frequently, not only after contact with food but sometimes even after stirring the saucepan. It became clear from these observations, as well as interview narratives, that skin

contact with food is felt to be, in line with the discussion of vomiting above, contaminating. But this does not only ensue from food itself as “abject” matter (Kristeva 1984; see also Warin 2010); instead it is engendered by a conceptualization of skin contact as a potential, and extremely unwanted, modality of *eating*.

This fear among participants of consuming through the skin serves to map eating—ingesting and swallowing in particular—across bodily surfaces. As eating is no longer confined to an agential taking in of food through the mouth, boundaries of inside and outside are reconfigured. This elucidates the sense of vulnerability experienced by many participants in relation to food and offers a key insight into the perpetual fear that is a part of the experience of living with anorexia. Elspeth Probyn (2001: 93) writes in her discussion of “eating skin,” rather than eating through the skin, that eating “foregrounds the conjoining of very different entities, marking the moment of excessive recognition.” The vulnerability articulated here resonates with a sense of feeling too open, too exposed—too “turned into” food, perhaps. If food threatens anorexia’s boundaries, it equally threatens to take away those of individuals who live, at least to a certain extent, within and through those boundaries. Anorexia may not be *about* the body but it is felt to allow a mapping of safety along corporeal perimeters.

The feared possibility of accidentally eating through the skin therefore harks back to the discussion of taste above. There I explored tasting as eliciting dangerous tongue/world encounters. Here, in the touching of food to skin we return to taste; although eating through the skin would seem to, once again, absent tasting from eating, they are linguistically reunified. In his *keywords*, Raymond Williams describes the first instance of the word taste in English as dating back to the thirteenth century. He states that this early meaning was “wider than tasting with the mouth and was nearer to the modern *touch* or *feel*” (2014: 310, italics in original). In a kind of analogous reversal of this, in her discussion of the intricacies of the

human digestive system, beautifully entitled *Gulp*, Mary Roach (2013: 33) discusses the way in which taste is “a sort of chemical touch,” describing taste cells as “specialised skin cells.” Or, to put it another way, “taste sensations seem to arise from whatever area is touched in the mouth” (Bartoshuk and Duffy 2005: 27).

This enfolding of all the danger that tasting signifies into skin touch draws to the fore a material property that was glimpsed but not fully explored in the above discussion of chewing and spitting; it is evinced by these further quotations from pro-anorexia websites:

Food wants you to eat it! Don't do it!!!

Food is sneaky, it's trying to temp you to eat it and get fat. Try this when you are all alone: Look at the food and laugh at it. Tell it that it can't tempt you and that you don't need it. This really helps!

Here food is “sneaky” not only because it can enter the body through alternative vectors, such as the skin, but also because it “makes” you *want* it by “tempting” you. Food, thus, is seen as having the potential not only to make the body, but also to *make the body eat*.

This conceptualization of food as “wanting you to eat it” imbues food with a sense of vitality. Vitality, Jane Bennett (2010: viii) suggests, is “the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and design of humans but also to act as quasi-agents or forces with trajectories, propensities or tendencies of their own.” As Bennett's words suggest, vitalism traced back to Gilles Deleuze emphasizes potentialities and agential capacities of matter. This underscores the necessity of reflecting on the agency (or many agencies, perhaps) of eating here. From participants' narratives it becomes clear that eating not only “happens” in a one-way encounter between the dynamic materialities of bodies and foods; rather, it is performed by *both* eater and eaten.

As Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (2010: 20) suggest, “paying attention to corporeality as a practical and efficacious series of emergent capacities thus reveals both the materiality of agency and agentic properties inherent in nature itself.” This invites reflection on the “virtuality” (Deleuze 1991) of food’s materiality, as emergent, potential, and indeterminate rather than static or stable. Yet, to think through this more fully we perhaps need to attend to the immateriality as well as materiality of food. As Mary Roach (2013: 14) reminds us, taste is “mostly smelling” and participants’ experiences of food smells draw a sense of the vitality, and indeed viscosity, of immateriality into this discussion.

An almost-constant presence of industrial cooking smells resonated throughout the EDU. These cut across its space, trapped and simmered throughout the day by the barred windows that articulate confinement within a psychiatric hospital. These smells were a frequent topic of conversation among participants who resented that their clothes and hair constantly smelled of food, as indeed, did mine during fieldwork. Deodorants and perfumes were continually sprayed to “decontaminate” rooms, and participants often held their noses and hid their faces from cooking smells. Such actions denote disgust at food as well as the fear already noted. But, against the background of narratives of eating through the skin, they also illustrate a wider sense among participants of smells as able to invade bodies and selves (see also Warin 2003). Smells have—and perform—the potential to become food in ways both immaterial and inedible through an unagential act of eating.

As smelling becomes eating here, taste is drawn back into the discussion in undesirable ways. Roach (2013: 14) reminds us that “eighty to ninety percent of the sensory experience of eating is olfaction” and this is because smells are released by chewing; they waft up the back of the mouth. Here instead smell elicits taste from outside of the body. Smelling becomes eating through a process of tasting, as participants described themselves invaded with the unwanted tastes of lunch even before the dreaded moments of entering the



dining room or taking a mouthful. As such, eating and tasting are realigned and yet tasting is emptied of any sense of the (albeit problematic) “good” that it had in chewing and spitting. Instead, enfolded into eating, it too becomes unagential and undesired.

The sense of eating immateriality that has arisen with the cooking smells of the EDU invites a reflection on the models of, and relationships between, materiality and immateriality that have so far woven themselves through this paper. It has become clear from the ways in which eating is both shaped by, and shapes, the materialities of food and bodies that materiality “is always something more than ‘mere’ matter” (Coole and Frost 2010: 9). As Karen Barad (2003: 828) likewise states: “matter is not a fixed essence; rather matter is a substance in its intra-active becoming—not a thing but a doing.” Corporeal and consumable materialities have been seen to be emergent and mutable, coming into being through their encounters rather than being fixed, static, or pre-social (see also Goodman 2001).

In turn, eating through the skin and eating smells have offered up a sense of immateriality that, in line with Alan Latham and Derek McCormack’s (2004: 703) discussions, is seen “not as something defined in opposition to the material, but as that which gives it expressive life and liveliness independent of the human subject.” It is with this interplay between—and simultaneity of—materiality and immateriality as *both* become food and non-food through eating that the next section engages. In so doing, it also pays attention to the ways in which eating may be distributed across multiple spaces and temporalities. This has been glimpsed in the diverse positionings of, and disjunctures between, smell, taste, and eating just noted and it has also resonated throughout the paper. In foregrounding these multiplicities, the final section will move beyond a model of eating-as-incorporation that has been troubled yet remained distinct in this discussion, to explore how eating becomes shared as its elements are dispersed among bodies.

### **Simultaneities and Disjunctures: Eating as Shared and Delegated**

In her interview, Kate talked about collecting takeout menus. Referring to the time before her admission to the EDU, she described making a detour home from school via all the local restaurants in order to read their blackboards, turn over in her mouth the words of the specials, and pick up menus to read alone at night. About this, Kate said, “I could almost imagine I could taste what I was reading... Once I’d read it, it almost felt like I’d eaten it. I’d want it so badly but I couldn’t let myself have it.” Likewise, in her interview Alexis, also an inpatient at the time, described her descent into anorexia as replete with “getting obsessed with like spending a lot of time in shops, wanting to go, as in supermarket shops or food shops, wanting to go to food shops a lot.” In the EDU during fieldwork patients would also sometimes surf Sainsbury’s website, clicking on image after image of food and abundantly filling their baskets, before closing down the computer without buying anything.

In a visual representation of this blurring between visuality and viscosity, pro-anorexia websites often contain links to websites stuffed full of “hyperreal” (Baudrillard 1983) images of “food porn” (see Lavis 2015c). Kate described her menu perusing as “like food porn” and, in so doing, aligned both of these food-centered engagements with other participants’ descriptions of chewing and spitting and the disconnecting of tasting and swallowing there. Highlighting the uncertain boundaries between “food porn” and “food,” participants describe “tasting” food porn, as Kate did with her menus; they draw dangerously close to food through the flavors of words and images.

Such engagements with imagined and viewed, as well as chewed, food all signify ways of, once again, testing one’s ability to resist food and thereby maintain anorexia. As such, they are very clearly modalities of not eating. However, against the background of this paper’s discussions of eating immateriality, it is also necessary to ask whether this means that they should *only* be thought of as *not* eating. They resonate with simultaneity—of things

being feared and desired, eaten and not eaten, material and immaterial, at once. Enfolding not eating and eating into co-temporality, they arguably emerge from participants' descriptions as *forms of eating*. Such acts enframe and replace *an* eating—one that we saw to be the linear incorporation of food reversed through vomiting, while also becoming *an alternative* way of eating. This inverts the process that we saw in relation to smells, by enfolding eating into tasting, rendering simultaneous an imagined materiality and tasted immateriality.

Demonstrating immaterial food to be corporeally incorporated in ways that once again remap vectors of ingestion and digestion through the slippage between visibility and viscosity, this also transubstantiates images into food; they are made material through eating.

As nascent forms of eating emerge and dissolve through these practices, eating itself is contingently assembled and fractured. Although each form is materialized through the encounter between eyes and screens, hungry stomachs and tasting brains, they also become disconnected from swallowing bodies. As such, eating is spatially distributed to become at once embodied but not necessarily bodily. This disjuncture, as eating takes place beyond corporeal perimeters, is most clearly seen in participants' narratives of cooking for other people and watching them eat; this performs eating beyond and among bodies and also brings tasting back into the discussion in an intriguing way.

In her interview, Alexis described being “infatuated” with food, which she detailed as “looking at menus, wanting to make food, wanting to bake.” About this latter, she said: “Let’s get cups and saucers and pretty spoons and a teapot and all these different kinds of teas and everyone come round. Let’s have tea!” Echoing Alexis’s descriptions of baking and setting out afternoon tea for friends, other participants discussed how they enjoyed preparing, often elaborate, food for others. This is also noted in clinical literature as a practice prevalent among individuals with anorexia (see Palazzoli 1977). In an article entitled “Anorexic Takes Up Baking to Gain Control over Food,” the journalist (Neporent 2012) writes:

Kuhns is a 29-year-old anorexic with a penchant for baking. She has never tasted one of her own confections. Her younger brother, Seth, samples dough and final products to let her know if anything is off, and her mother, Ilene, tastes the frosting.

In the same article, an assistant psychologist, Jennifer Thomas, is quoted as saying:

Patients will prepare elaborate meals for friends and family while they themselves go hungry. They get a vicarious joy and a sense of superiority from watching others indulge while they don't allow themselves to eat.

As does Kafka's "hunger artist" (Kafka 1961), Kuhns derives pleasure from viewing others eat while avoiding ingestion. It has been suggested that this encouragement of others is part of a "mimetic desire" for thinness that results in competition (see Girard 2013).

However, given that this paper has already argued for a de-privileging of thinness and a greater attention to the desire to stay anorexic as that which underpins (not) eating, a return to thinness as an explanatory focus would miss the central dynamic here. While there is clearly a conceptual and spatial divide between Kuhns and the cake frosting, this does not only constitute a rejection of eating. Rather, as both not eating and eating have emerged as key to maintaining the relationship between anorexia and self, watching others eat offers a way to simultaneously eat and not eat.

The uncertain and contingent overlap between eating and not eating here highlights "the fleshy interface between bodies and worlds" (Ahmed and Stacey 2001: 1) as these are made and unmade through consumption practices. This intersects with previous explorations of the viscosity of relationships among bodies, selves, and foods, whether these encapsulate

an embodied politics of connection (see Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2010; Guthman 2011; Probyn 2000) or the vulnerabilities of intimacy. Against the background of these discussions and the analysis of food porn and menus as eaten, cooking for others emerges *as* a form of eating. It is eating through an Other—an act of consumption that is shared with, or perhaps delegated to, the bodies of other people.

Here, thus, we have a sense of eating as taking place in, through, and among, myriad bodies, where the dislocations of tasting from digesting, swallowing from eating, seen above, are spatialized. Body/food encounters are not only distributed across one body as the separated-out components of eating map across surfaces and depths; they are shared among bodies (see also Lavis 2015b). Here such visceral viewing reconfigures outsides and insides in an echo of vomiting, discussed earlier. Food may be swallowed by one body, tasted by another, and smelled by yet another, with all of these signifying forms of eating that affectively conjoin bodies through a slippage between visibility and viscosity.

To think this through, we might return to the discussion of eating through the skin and the sense of taste as touch that was present there, and reflect now on skin as an analytic as well as tactile vector. It has been suggested that skin “protects us from others and exposes us to them” (Cataldi 1993: 145). As Serres (2008: 80) reminds us, its directionality is therefore dual: “in it, through it, with it, the world and my body touch each other, the feeling and the felt, it defines their common edge.” As such, skin “intervenes between several things in the world and makes them mingle” (ibid.). Eating and skin conceptually align as eating connects, skin connects, and both are directionally dual. In Kuhns’s cooking, as in the viewing of food porn photographed and eaten elsewhere, there is a hybridization of the eating body and a distributed embodiment. Visual consumption may be a form of eating as pleasurable and fearful as taking food into the mouth, chewing, swallowing, and digesting.

### **Concluding Reflections: What Is Eating?**

By suggesting that participants' relationships with their illness illustrate what eating and not eating do in (and to) anorexia, an analysis of food-centered practices has offered insights into a much misunderstood and profoundly painful illness. From participants' narratives it has emerged that not only is food viscerally feared, but also that anorexia is maintained by a constant processual negotiation of eating as well as not eating. The complexities of material encounters between food and bodies are therefore key to gaining insights into eating disorders and their known intransigence. In highlighting this, the paper has called for a scholarly recognition of the diverse materialities embedded in lived experiences of eating disorders and mental ill-health more widely.

This empirical exploration has been accompanied by a theoretical emphasis on critically interrogating what eating is, and an engagement with the ways in which participants' practices draw attention to its uncertain boundaries. Narratives of consuming food through an Other's body as well as one's own skin, for example, have evoked a portrait of eating as a shifting and multiple act, evolving through praxis. Disjunctures among tasting and ingesting, swallowing and touching have emerged and disappeared through mundane but contingent and tense moments of consumption and starvation. This has elucidated how eating takes place across bodies, as well as within them, and has drawn attention to the ways in which eating erects and disassembles corporeal boundaries. Bodily thresholds have been shown to be imbued with dynamism rather than stasis as (not) eating bodies are opened up to the affective corporeality of others and viscera are "turned inside out" (see Bakhtin 1984). Eating, thus, is an act that draws multiple bodies into a single moment of shared consumption while also being, like anorexia perhaps, embodied but not always bodily.

As eating has slipped in and out of bodies in this way, it has also been seen to produce, as well as displace or break down, the materialities of food. Extending existing

discussions of how substances become food, participants' narratives have illuminated how eating practices evoke a continual interplay between materiality and immateriality and draw into conflict edible and eatable. Slippages among visibility, viscosity, and vitality have shown that eating does not only happen in a one-way encounter between bodies and foods, but is enacted by both eater and eaten. As such, eating perhaps always comprises a complex and affective entanglement of material imaginings and imagined materialities.

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### **Bio:**

Anna Lavis is a Lecturer in Medical Sociology at the University of Birmingham. Her research focuses on illness and caregiving experiences, particularly in relation to mental ill-health and distress. She has presented and published across the social and medical sciences

and has recently co-edited a special issue of *M/C Journal* entitled “Corporeal” (Lavis and Eli 2016). Anna holds an honorary post in the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford. There, with Karin Eli, she founded the Body and Being Network, which creates public events by developing dialogues about the body among social and medical scientists and performance artists.

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